



PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY

Jack B. Johnson, County Executive

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Testimony

Of

Sheriff Michael A. Jackson

**On behalf of
Prince George's County, Maryland**

Before the Subcommittee on Telecommunications and the Internet

Energy and Commerce Committee

U.S. House of Representatives

Hearing on H.R. 5785, the Warning, Alert, and Response Network Act of 2006

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I. INTRODUCTION

Good morning, Chairman Upton, Congressman Markey, and Members of the Subcommittee, my name is Michael A. Jackson. I am the Sheriff of Prince George's County, Maryland. I appear before you today on behalf of one of the largest Counties in the National Capitol Region. Currently, I also serve as the 1st Vice-President of the Maryland Sheriff's Association and the Secretary/Treasurer of the Court Officers Board Association.

Before I begin, I also want to take this time to thank Congressman Albert Wynn for his leadership on the critical issue of national alert communications and for recommending that I appear before you today.

II. THE WARN ACT AND THE REALITIES FACING THE NATIONAL CAPITOL REGION

First, I want to applaud the original co-sponsors of HR 5785, the *Warning, Alert, and Response Network Act* for their vision and foresight in realizing the need for updating our Nation's emergency alert system. Modernization of emergency communications for the public is essential for a sound homeland security policy. Even more important is that a new system incorporate new forms of communication such as cell phone and Blackberries; I'm pleased to say the WARN Act does just that.

I would also like to commend the wireless industry for combining their efforts with the National Center for Missing and Endangered Children (NCMEC) and law enforcement agencies. The wireless AMBER Alerts Initiative will be a catalyst for the wireless industry's more than 200-million wireless subscribers to aid in the return of an abducted child. The NCMEC is solely responsible for creating the content for an alert distributed to wireless carriers through Syniverse Technologies.

Prince George's County, Maryland is located in the heart of the Baltimore/Washington corridor. The county borders Washington, DC and is just 37 miles south of the City of Baltimore. The County's population exceeds 820,000 with a daily work population of well over one million. Covering an area of close to 500 square miles, the County is home to many businesses, as well as state and federal agencies. Some of the Federal agencies include NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center, Andrews Air Force Base, several Smithsonian support centers, the Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Agriculture's Beltsville facility, a Federal Records Center, a large Internal

Revenue Service office complex, and the NOAA Center for Weather and Climate Prediction – a critical partner in building and maintaining the National Alert System. Additionally, a large portion of the region’s Metro system and Interstate 95 pass through Prince George’s County.

For most communities in America, the threat of terrorism remains just that; a threat. Only two areas of the United States have experienced the heinous acts of foreign-born terrorism and have led all of us to understand the need to support public alertness as well as first responder emergency communications interoperability. Prince George’s County is a prime target for a terrorist attack because of its close proximity to the District of Columbia. Therefore, Prince George’s County is in a prime position to offer perspectives on how to address the need, impact, and practicality of a new public alert system.

III. THE WARN ACT, A GOOD FIRST STEP IN A LONG JOURNEY AHEAD

What I have just explained is the grim reality facing the National Capitol Region. As I have stated, a modern national alert system could have helped the public during 9/11. However, HR 5785 is only the first step in a long road ahead toward not just notifying the public, but our first responders as well. One of the best provisions of the bill is that federal, state and local emergency managers can input alerts into the system and have them directed out to a geographically targeted section of the population. However, as a local official, I can not help but reflect on the complete bureaucratic paralysis that crippled an effective response to Hurricane Katrina. As public safety officers, we have been watching our national government grapple with control and oversight problems with the vast management challenges involved in homeland security.

To that end, I urge that lawmakers use this system as a platform to draw attention to not just a well informed public, but a well wired first responder community. It is almost ironic that we are discussing this system now in the face of dangerous cuts to Urban Areas Security Initiatives and constant reductions in funding for the Nation’s first responder grant programs. Just last month, Maryland officials testified to the House Government Reform Subcommittee on National Security stating how much the cuts to UASI would devastate State homeland security preparedness operations. My state

sustained more than a 50% cut to UASI for the National Capitol Region. Maryland officials testified to House members that they thought if they had done nothing and not even filled-out the UASI application for 2006, they would have received around \$10 million. In reality, Maryland received \$8 million.

Prince George's County is in a unique position when it comes to emergency communications, as we are the only county in the NCR that does not have an interoperable radio system. We are the hole in the communications net that covers the Capitol Region. The County Executive is committed to fixing this problem and fast. But, a \$75 million plus price tag makes this a daunting task. This is not a County need; this is a regional need with national implications. We have been working hard to secure Federal assistance in plugging the only hole in the net.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

In looking at the WARN Act, we would make the following recommendations:

- We would recommend the "National Alert System Working Group" have at least one public safety official and/or local government executive from a locality within the National Capitol Region.
- Ensure that the National Alert Office in the National Telecommunications and Information Administration coordinate with the appropriate federal agencies to provide expertise on the best methods to assess the government's disaster preparedness.
- Consider an advance alert and local government participation requirement for County Executives and Mayors so they are notified in advance if an emergency alert is going to be broadcast in their jurisdiction so they can take steps to mobilize resources.

V. CHALLENGES AHEAD

9/11 and Hurricane Katrina have taught us that local alerts are not enough. Perhaps with a regional warning in place, the jurisdictions surrounding areas directly affected could have provided a quicker and more efficient response, allowing more time

for agencies such as FEMA and the Red Cross to properly implement their aid and service plans.

I can say confidently that local public safety officials are ready to work with you in making a modern national alert system a reality. On the ground, we have seen the terrible consequences of poor oversight over homeland security initiatives. We have also seen the great strides made in building a more informed, more aware public.

When a person receives an alert on their cell phone or otherwise, they appreciate the information. However, the next thought that will occur to them will be will be “how can I get to my family as quick as possible?” At that point our inquiry turns to transportation and two-way communication built to handle a disaster volume of interface from the public. Thus, this truly important first step of many and I thank you for taking it. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.